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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

It’s really disheartening to pick up a newspaper these days and read all of the dismal news out there. Where is this world headed? The economy, not just in this country, but globally, is in the crapper! Today’s political scene, i.e. the presidential election, isn’t showing anything of a positive note - just more of the same old thing. I don’t know about you, but it’s going to be a long tough haul until at least after a new president is sworn in. Aren’t global crises a wonderful thing during a lame duck term in the presidency?!

So, while many of us are losing sleep wondering how we’ll keep making mortgage payments AND putting food on the table, let’s continue to watch millions of dollars being poured into political campaigns trying to make the other look worse than the other. And we wonder why this country is going down the tubes!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I apologize for my absence last week, and I thank those of you who emailed me to see if everything was okay. I wasn’t at death’s door or anything, but I’ve been having a lot of sinus problems this year. Those of you who have the same problem will know what I’m talking about... the pressure and pain of a sinus headache that makes it hard to even think (not an easy thing for me to do in the first place).

And there aren’t a lot of messages to go through this week... again... but I wanted to touch base with you anyway, since the election is coming up. If you’re an American (and I mean a citizen, not the sleazy pablum ’you don’t agree with me so you’re not an American’ crap that we’ve been seeing lately), then it’s not only your right to vote, it’s your RESPONSIBILITY!

I believe that this is an important election and, whether you agree with my politics or not, I want you to vote. It’s the only way we’ve got to get to the things we want and need to get to.

I know that, right now, there are plenty of you thinking that one vote one way or the other really won’t matter, or that no matter who’s elected things are going to stay the same, and, quite honestly, you may well be right... but if you don’t vote, you’ve got no chance at all.

So get out there and vote your conscience, vote your religion, vote your party... but VOTE!

And for those readers who are not citizens of the United States who are saying, "Yeah, but what does that matter to me?", all I can say is: "Look at the economy". Yours, as well as ours, is in trouble. I’m not going to say that you’ve got NO chance of pulling out of this trouble without the United States doing so along with you, but let’s face it, we’re all better off when we’re all better off.

’Nuff said?

Okay, let’s take a look at the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Pierre Ton-That posts this about KKCommander:

"Download on my homepage or directly in the folder:
http://rajah.atari.org/files/ -> kkcmd_uk.zip (75KB)

New features for this bad Total Commander clone:

+ ST-Guide documentation
+ iconification
+ use of AVSERVER to open non-executable files
+ Ctrl+S = save preferences ad paths
+ ’ˆ ´ -la-Total-Commander’ file selection: red or grisˆ ´',
  when playing with keys, a framing cursor is used.
+ the ’Insert’ key selects the file/folder under the cursor
  (Merci MiKRO)
+ split file like in Total Commander
+ unsplit file (double-click on .CRC file)
  split/unsplit results are created in the opposite window.
  (Thanks Dbug/NeXT)

Voilˆ ´ .

I have to study the .ZIP file format. It’s a big piece of cake, so I prefer to release something now. I’m not sure I will be able to implement the .ZIP compression in the KKcmd."

Derryck Croker tells Pierre:

"Piece of cake" means that it’s an easy job, which I don’t think you

meant to say [grin]"

Pierre tells Derryck:

"Yes, you understand my meaning. Sorry for the bad translation.

I though about "gros morceau" ("big part/slice), and had in mind the expression "^ ´'touffe-chr^ ´'tien" (choke a christian believer), which is said when the cake is really hard to eat, so dry and copious to chew that you have the feeling of Death coming near you just before you swallow the stuff."

Derryck replies:

"I'd call that sort of cake "worthy" I think, with nothing about it to make it palatable [smile]

Lovely expression though, can't think of an equivalent one from England at the moment."

Lonny Pursell adds:

"There's some nice libs for zip. Its a shame there's no shared lib (SLB). Then you would not have to re-invent ZIP decoding."

Last week, Nate McCoy asked about creating GEM-formatted floppies. They asked:

"I recently acquired an Atari 1040 STe. I would love to use it but do not have the OS on floppy. I only have the computer itself.

Where may I acquire images of GEM OS and how can i write them to a floppy disk in Windows XP or Linux?

Also, Am I considering the right path when looking to make a floppy of GEM OS, or did the Atari 1040 STe come with the OS on ROM?"

Jean-Luc Ceccoli tells Nate:

"GEM isn't the OS. It's part of the OS. And it's embedded into any TOS machine since 1987.

As it's a ST*e*, it's been manufactured after 1987, so all you need to start and use it is plug and switch it on.

Moreover, bootable OS floppies wouldn't run fine on such a machine, as they were made for early STs, which had a slightly different HW."

Nate does some looking around and replies:

"Thank you very much, I looked some more information up and i realized now that GEM is just the GUI for TOS. Thanks again for pointing me in the right direction."

Jean-Luc tells Nate:

"GEM isn't the OS. It's part of the OS. And it's embedded into any TOS machine since 1987.

As it's a ST*e*, it's been manufactured after 1987, so all you need to start and use it is plug and switch it on.

Moreover, bootable OS floppies wouldn't run fine on such a machine, as they were made for early STs, which had a slightly different HW."

'Ppera' adds:

"Atari ST machines have TOS, GEM, Desktop, all in ROM. Only very early versions from 1985 were without ROM TOS, and required bootable floppy with OS.

I guess that you want to do some file transfer in relations PC-Atari ST. I wrote program for that, about 2 years ago:

http://www.ppest.org/atari/floimgd.php

In archive you may find even image files of empty floppies, usable on PC and Atari. 720KB in DOS format, and 800KB in Atari format, but readable under WinXP with Floppy Imager.

If you want to make TOS floppy, bootable, it is possible too (although no need for it, really).

http://www.ppest.org/atari/tosload.htm - Get CREDISK.ZIP . Need some TOS image too. It can be found on diverse places for DL.

Note: with TOS itself, regardless if it in ROM, or booted from floppy you can not do much. You need applications, games for Atari ST."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Fable II: A Living World of Adventure!
Zombies Attack 'World of Warcraft'!
BioShock Ships
And more!

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BioShock Ships For PlayStation 3

2K Games, a publishing label of Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., announced Monday that BioShock for the PlayStation 3 computer entertainment system is now shipping to retailers across North America and is currently available internationally. A global smash hit on the Xbox 360 video game and entertainment system from Microsoft and Games for Windows, BioShock for the PlayStation 3 system continues the success by earning perfect scores from PlayStation: The Official Magazine and GamePro Magazine.

"We are very excited to bring BioShock to an entirely new audience of gamers," said Christoph Hartmann, president of 2K. "With its new features and the PS3 exclusive downloadable content, we are confident that players will have even more reasons to fall in love with the unique and unforgettable world of Rapture."

Developed by 2K Boston, 2K Australia, 2K Marin and Digital Extremes, BioShock for the PlayStation 3 system contains all-new content that augments and extends the experience in exciting ways. BioShock for PlayStation 3 system contains new features such as the inclusion of the Survivor difficulty mode, Trophy support and the addition of all-new Add-On Game Content that will be available for download shortly after launch. A free demo that allows gamers to play through the first portion of BioShock is currently available for download from the PlayStation Network.

BioShock is a narrative-driven action experience that allows players to do the impossible as they journey through an amazing, immersive and terrifying world. Caught between powerful forces and hunted down by genetically mutated citizens, the player will come to grips with the mysterious and fascinating world of Rapture, a distinct Art Deco underwater utopia gone mad. BioShock not only challenges players capacity to adapt and survive, but brings to question their values and relationships with the inhabitants of Rapture. With smart and adaptive AI, no encounter ever plays out the same way twice, while numerous customization options provide gamers with an experience that adapts to their playing style.

BioShock for PlayStation 3 system will be available in North America starting October 21 and is currently available internationally. The title has been rated M for Mature by the ESRB. Also available on Xbox 360 and Games for Windows, BioShock was the recipient of more than 50 Game of the Year awards from prestigious outlets such as The Associated Press and Game Informer Magazine.

'Fable II': A Living, Breathing World of Adventure

Peter Molyneux is one of the video-game industry's most enthusiastic promoters, always pushing the boundaries of what games can accomplish. He's generally credited with inventing the "god game" with 1989's

"Populous" (to which this year's "Spore" owes an incalculable debt), and his other successes include "Syndicate," "Dungeon Keeper," "Black & White" and "The Movies."

Molyneux has also developed a reputation for biting off more than he can chew. Before the 2004 release of "Fable," for example, he crowed, "It's gonna be the best game ever." A few months later, he famously apologized for promising features that the final product didn't deliver.

Over the last few years, Molyneux's been talking a lot about "Fable II" (Microsoft, for the Xbox 360, $59.99). But this time, he's throttled back the hype and talked about features only when he was confident that they would appear in the game. "I hope you're going to say, 'This is a lot more than what I expected,'" he told one British gaming Web site.

As one of those players who found "Fable" somewhat disappointing, I'm happy to say "Fable II" is, indeed, a lot more than what I expected. It delivers on most of what Molyneux promised the first time around, presenting a living, breathing world filled with adventure. It's not perfect - which Molyneux has already acknowledged - but it is one of the most absorbing experiences you can have on an Xbox 360.

Your first choice is simple: Do you want to play as a boy or a girl? Then you're dumped on the snowy streets of a Dickensian town called Bowerstone, where you and your sister, Rose, scrounge for coins. After rescuing a puppy and cranking up a magic music box, you and Rose are summoned by the mysterious Lord Lucien - who promptly murders Rose and tries to kill you.

Ten years later, you're a teenager with a mission: Avenge your sister. Your journey covers a vast, exquisitely detailed world filled with verdant fields, bustling cities and deadly dungeons, with dozens of missions leading up to your final confrontation with Lucien.

The setting, a planet called Albion, is the most immediately striking feature of "Fable II." The landscape changes constantly, not just from night to day but from season to season. You can communicate with nearly everyone you meet, and you can enter every building in Albion.

As with any role-playing game, your character evolves as the game proceeds: Your attacks get stronger, you learn more powerful spells and you can afford better equipment. In "Fable II," though, your moral choices are also reflected. Strangers react differently if you have a bad reputation, and real evildoers develop nasty skin problems. You can also get married, buy a house and have kids, or have affairs with as many villagers as you can seduce. (Beware, though: Venereal disease is a real threat.)

Still, the most important relationship you'll have in Albion is with that dog you rescued in Act I. He's one of the most delightful creatures ever seen in a video game, a supporting character with more personality than most games' lead characters. The animators at Molyneux's Lionhead Studios have clearly spent a lot of time studying dog behavior, because this mutt acts like the real thing. And he's an invaluable companion, sniffing out buried treasure, growling when enemies approach and lending a paw when battles get heated.

"Fable II" doesn't have the most original plot. It often feels like a potpourri of elements from every fantasy epic you've ever read, from "The Odyssey" and "The Arabian Nights" to "The Lord of the Rings" and

the Harry Potter series. But genre fans are just as likely to appreciate the references as to be annoyed by them; there’s even a clever shout-out to last year’s great science-fiction adventure "BioShock."

More problematic, the combat is a bit simplistic: You press one button for melee attacks (swords, axes), one button for ranged attacks (guns, crossbows) and one button for magic. Likewise, most of the dungeons are a little too straightforward for battle-hardened role-playing fans. And as beautiful as Albion is, you’ll spend a lot of time simply roaming in search of your next quest.

Nonetheless, I really got sucked into the world of "Fable II." It doesn’t reinvent the RPG, but it does make the genre accessible to newcomers while providing more than enough action to satisfy the most demanding aficionado. It’s nearly irresistible. Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

Zombies Attack ’World of Warcraft,’ ’Grand Theft Auto’

Brains... braiiinnnsss...

A horde of the undead is shambling across the bucolic forests of Lakeshire, through to the fortress of Stormwind, and onto...Liberty City?

It appears so, just in time for Halloween. World of Warcraft saw the opening act for the upcoming Wrath of the Lich King expansion unfold Thursday night with a full-on zombie apocalypse, allowing players to both fight off and become flesh-eating ghouls themselves.

The world event has inspired both praise and criticism, prompting guides like Bornakk’s Zombie Infestation Survival Guide, as well as a post on zombie misinformation.

But 1UP is also reporting that strange signs have been seen around the Liberty City of Grand Theft Auto 4, warning of an imminent contagion. More zombies? Given that art assets have already leaked, it appears so.

And if that isn’t enough, Zombies!!! is also coming to Xbox Live, PSN, and Steam. And that doesn’t even include the next offering from Half-Life developer Valve Software, titled Left 4 Dead.

Our recommendation: walk carefully, and carry a big (boom)stick.

Sony Delays Videogame Over Offensive Music

Sony Corp has delayed sales of "LittleBigPlanet," one of its most widely anticipated videogames, by at least one week in the United States after finding potentially offensive background music in the game.

The puzzle-solving, community-based game, published by Sony Computer Entertainment for the PlayStation 3, will begin shipping to retail shops during the week of October 27, Sony said on Monday.

The company will replace the shipped version of the game, originally set

for release on October 21, with newly mastered copies. Sony declined to disclose the costs associated with the move, a representative said.

The music in question is "Tapha Niang" a song performed by Malian musician Toumani Diabate, Sony said.

"One of the background music tracks that was licensed from a record label for use in the game contains two expressions that can be found in the Qur'an," the company said in a statement. "We have taken immediate action to rectify this and we sincerely apologize for any offense this may have caused."

Sony, whose PlayStation 3 game console is locked in a battle with Microsoft Corp's Xbox 360 and Nintendo Co Ltd's Wii, has been touting the game since early in 2007.

LittleBigPlanet lets users create virtual worlds and they can play and share what they build with other worldwide users.

Videogame Makers Bank on Sequels

Sequels may not always match up to the original in Hollywood but videogames can often get better the second or third time around.

Videogame producers are hoping it will hold true with the latest games that will hit store shelves soon including Insomniac Games' "Resistance 2" PlayStation 3 exclusive, Epic Games' "Gears of War 2" Xbox 360 exclusive, Microsoft's "Fable 2," and Bethesda Softworks' "Fallout 3."

"Developers can hit the ground running with sequels," said Ted Price, president and CEO of Insomniac Games. "The game's story and art style have a solid base, the tech and tools are stable and the basic gameplay mechanics have gone through plenty of tuning in the first game."

The second or third time around developers can devote more energy to building game assets instead of trying to get things up and running.

"It's certainly a liberating experience when you're no longer arguing over the main character's name, or waiting for basic systems to be implemented," said Price. "The end result is usually a game that's bigger, more polished and has more innovative features than the original game."

"Resistance 2," thrusts players into an alternate 1950s America invaded by aliens called Chimera. In addition to a single-player campaign, the game offers an eight-player cooperative campaign and online gameplay with battlefields filled with 60 players.

Aliens also feature in "Gears of War 2", which sends gamers into the depths of the planet Sera to tackle a race called the Locusts. The sequel offers a story that can be played with a friend. Online gameplay modes like "Horde" also pit up to five players against waves of heavily armed Locusts.

"We want casual gamers to play the game and be sucked into the universe and finish the game," said Cliff Bleszinski, lead games designer, Epic Games. "We want them to potentially finish with a friend and become a

fan of the characters and the setting."

Attracting the mainstream audience was also a major goal of Peter Molyneux, creator of Microsoft's "Fable II" for Xbox 360. He's crafted a game that he believes will satisfy the 3 million gamers who bought the original, while opening up the fantasy role-playing adventure genre to anyone.

"We've designed this game to allow the player to do whatever they wish, including getting married and having kids, playing mini-games and creating a custom character that will evolve as you play," said Molyneux.

"Call of Duty: World at War," the latest game in the franchise focuses on the bloody Pacific Front and the Russian invasion of Nazi-occupied Berlin during the Second World War.

"The developer spent two years working on the technology behind this game, which includes four-player cooperative play and the introduction of new weapons like flame throwers and flame tanks," said Daniel Suarez, executive producer of the game at Activision

Gamers have been waiting 10 years for Bethesda Softworks' "Fallout 3," for PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

"I think it's good for people to miss things," said Todd Howard, executive producer of the game. "Ten years between 'Fallout' is a bit long, but I think there's this nostalgia factor."

Fans of the post-Apocalyptic game, set in Washington, D.C., won't have to wait another decade for "Fallout 4." Howard said he believes three years is a good time frame between games.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Record Traffic for US Political Blogs, News Sites

The US presidential election is driving record numbers of visitors to political blogs and independent news sites, a company which measures online traffic reported Wednesday.

Reston, Virginia-based comScore Inc. said political blogs and news sites unaffiliated with a larger media outlet experienced strong gains in the number of unique visitors in September compared with a year ago.

HuffingtonPost.com, a Democratic-leaning blog and news website founded three years ago by Greek-born socialite Arianna Huffington, received 4.5 million unique visitors in September, up 474 percent from 792,000 a year earlier.

Politico.com, a political news site launched in January 2007 by former reporters at The Washington Post and Time magazine, drew 2.4 million unique visitors in September, up 344 percent from 532,000 a year earlier.

The Republican-leaning Drudgereport.com received 2.0 million unique visitors in September, up 70 percent from 1.2 million a year earlier, comScore said.

It said Realclearpolitics.com, a website which tracks the latest voter polls and other political news, received 1.1 million unique visitors in September, up 489 percent from 192,000 a year earlier.

Other blogs which have seen at least a doubling in their traffic figures include DailyKos.com, Townhall.com, Newsbusters.org, TalkingPointsMemo.com, MichelleMalkin.com and RedState.com, comScore said.

"With each new election cycle, the Internet is playing a more significant role in shaping the stories of the day that are so crucial in formulating public opinion on issues and candidates," said Andrew Lipsman, a senior analyst at comScore.

He added that independent blogs unaffiliated with larger media outlets "are really beginning to enter the mainstream public consciousness with this current election cycle."

While political blogs and independent news sites are gaining audience, most Americans still go to more established media outlets for their general news.

Yahoo News drew 41.2 million unique visitors in September followed by MSNBC with 34.2 million and CNN with 33.8 million, according to comScore figures.

Apple To Offer $999 Entry Laptop, Better Graphics

Apple Inc. touched up its line of laptop computers Tuesday with a minimal nod to the economic turmoil that might push consumers to be more frugal this holiday shopping season.

Apple did lower its least expensive laptop, the existing version of the entry-level MacBook, by $100 to $999.

But in the updated versions of its MacBook and MacBook Pro machines, Apple focused mainly on adding features. Some had been in the svelte MacBook Air, including thinner laptop casings and a "multitouch" track pad, which, like the iPhone, understands gestures for spinning and zooming.

In an event at Apple’s headquarters, Steve Jobs, Apple’s co-founder and CEO, also said Apple broadened its use of graphics chips and associated technologies from Nvidia Corp., at the expense of Intel Corp., which still supplies the computers’ central processors. Jobs said the change speeds up processing-intensive activities - playing popular 3-D video games, for example - as much as six-fold.

As at other events in the last few months, Jobs appeared thin but, in a tongue-in-cheek nod to persistent questions about his health, projected

a slide with his healthy 110-over-70 blood pressure reading.

The redesigned laptops are thinner and lighter, and use what Apple touted as a construction "breakthrough" when it debuted in the super-slim MacBook Air in January. All the new laptops now use casings cut and tooled from aluminum, without a stronger skeleton fused to the insides.

At the lowest end of the redesigned laptops, a MacBook will cost $1,299, while the most expensive MacBook Pro, which comes with two graphics chips from Nvidia for extra-fast graphics processing, costs $2,499 - a $300 reduction from the previous top model. An updated MacBook Air, the ultra-thin portable notebook that does not have a CD or DVD drive on board, begins at $1,799, just as the previous Air did.

The track pads built into MacBooks and MacBook Pros also got a makeover. They're much larger and made from glass for smooth scrolling, and instead of a separate button to mimic the clicking of a mouse, the entire track pad depresses.

Jobs declined to take questions on the economy, telling reporters and analysts that "there are much smarter people than us that you can ask about the global financial meltdown."

However, Apple's decision to keep most laptop prices well over $1,000, despite competition from PC makers whose cheapest notebooks cost less than $500, would appear to reflect the company's confidence it can maintain its premium status even in tough times.

Tim Cook, Apple's chief operating officer, said Apple was benefiting from negative press for Microsoft Corp.'s Windows Vista operating system, and pointed out that Macintosh sales growth has far outpaced the broader PC market over the last several quarters. Market tracker IDC said in its last quarterly report, in July, that Apple ranked third in the U.S. PC market, with 7.8 percent share.

Steven Baker, an analyst for market researcher NPD Group, said he wasn't surprised by Apple's decisions on pricing or the new features it incorporated into the laptop line. Baker expects Apple's sales to slow this year along with other PC makers as economic jitters inhibit consumer spending.

"Clearly the MacBooks and MacBook Pros were in need of a refresh," Baker said. The update was incremental, he said, but "that's kind of where the PC market is these days."

Apple's decision to work more closely with Nvidia for its graphics processing could be a needed boost for the Silicon Valley chip maker.

In July, Nvidia disclosed a major problem with an unspecified number of its laptop chips that were already built into computers from several manufacturers. The problem caused the chips to suddenly fail, leaving users with badly mangled video or no video at all.

Hewlett-Packard Co., Dell Inc. and Apple have notified customers that their machines contained the problem with Nvidia chips. Apple's notice came just this week.

Nvidia hasn't recalled the chips, and the computer makers have so far said they won't replace all the problem chips - just the ones that fail.

The original disclosure caused a 31 percent one-day drop in Nvidia's stock price, and the shares have continued sinking. Although Nvidia remains the world's largest maker of standalone graphics chips, the foul-up has given a big opening to its main rival, ATI Technologies, a company now owned by Advanced Micro Devices Inc.

New MacBook Puts Style Over Affordability

Plastic used to be the sexy material of the future. Now, it's the cheap, ugly material of the past.

Just look at the effort Apple Inc. put into getting rid of plastic when designing its new $1,300 MacBook laptops, which went on sale last week. Apple now is machining the upper part of the chassis from a single block of aluminum, shaving it down to perhaps one-tenth of its original mass.

The result is a laptop with the stark elegance of a Modernist skyscraper, all glass and metal. The only things that are still plastic are the keys, the Apple logo on the lid, the bumpers on the bottom and some cladding on the hinge between the bottom and the display.

All that metal looks great, and it feels cool, in both senses of the word, to touch. But is this really what we want out of Apple?

The company is doing better than ever, with 9.5 percent of the U.S. PC market, according to Gartner Inc. Ten years ago, that figure was more like 3 percent. Not to knock Apple hardware, but I think the reason for this rally is mostly the company's software, which is easy to use and well integrated with the hardware and Apple's online services.

One of the best ways to get access to Apple's OS X software has been its cheapest laptop, the MacBook. Chief Executive Steve Jobs has said it's Apple's best-selling computer. But at $1,100, it's been nearly twice as expensive as a Windows laptop with comparable hardware. That's a hefty premium to pay for good software.

Unfortunately, with the laptops it released last week, Apple chose to make the hardware slicker and more stylish, rather than push the price down. It brought some of the features of its even more expensive MacBook Pro line to the consumer line, rather than bringing the consumer line substantially closer to Windows PCs in price (though the older MacBook, now dubbed the "MacBook White," got a $100 price cut. At $1,300, the cheapest of the new metal MacBooks is now $200 more expensive than the old plastic one.

For the price you do get some nifty new features, but some omissions in the MacBook package remain.

The new MacBook has the same 13.3-inch screen as the White, but it's now backed by light-emitting diodes rather than fluorescent tubes. This means the screen reaches full brightness faster, and extends battery life a little bit.

The track pad is now huge and covered by glass, which gives it a pleasant, luxurious feel. The button has been eliminated to provide a larger tracking surface, but the bottom corners are spring-loaded,

acting as buttons.

The graphics chip has been considerably upgraded, which helps with games and movie playback. I was able to play the fairly taxing 3-D spaceship game "Eve Online," which has been difficult or impossible on a non-Pro MacBook before.

My favorite upgrade is the external battery indicator, which should be passed into law. Pressing a small button on the side of the laptop will light a row of eight diodes to tell you how much charge is left in the battery, even if the computer is off. Previous MacBooks had these indicators on the battery, so you had to turn the unit upside down to get a readout. A few Windows laptops have indicators on their batteries, but I don’t know of any that are as convenient to read as the new MacBook’s. Most laptops have no external indicators at all, so you have to turn them on to find out whether they need charging.

The new model weighs 4.5 pounds, half a pound less than the White, yet it has longer battery life. Apple says it’s good for five hours of "wireless productivity," which presumably includes periods of inactivity. I got one hour and 50 minutes of life from the battery when I played movies and games nonstop at full screen brightness.

Like all Apple laptops, the MacBook lacks a slot for data cards from cameras, phones and music players. This isn’t a problem if you’re carrying the right cable to connect your camera via the USB port, but isn’t Apple supposed to be about easy, elegant computing?

Also, the MacBook has only two USB ports, and they’re both on the left side of the body. If you use a mouse with your right hand, the cable has to snake around.

Casting a glance at the competition from the Windows side: Hewlett-Packard Co.’s new dv3510nr has a screen that’s the same size, also backlit by LEDs and powered by a good graphics chip. It weighs the same as the MacBook, yet it has a larger hard drive, a backlit keyboard, a card reader and three USB ports, one of which one doubles as the kind of port needed for the newest, fastest external hard drives. Another port lets you connect the computer to a high-definition TV set with a standard cable. All for $100 less than the MacBook.

Of course, the HP computer is plastic, but from a utilitarian point of view, that isn’t a bad material for consumer electronics. It’s tough. It’s light. It’s easy to manufacture. High-end cameras used to have shells of brass and aluminum, but they were prone to denting, so the metal was phased out in favor of plastics that were tougher and gave a better grip. (In fairness to aluminum, it is much easier to recycle than plastic. Apple made several other environmentally conscious choices in designing the MacBook.)

The new MacBook is an excellent computer, but doesn’t really the change the advice I would give people who are looking for a new laptop. If you’re price-conscious but really want Apple software, get the $1,000 MacBook White. If you’re price-conscious but not set on Apple software, get a Windows laptop. If you aren’t price-conscious ... hey, can you spare me a hundred bucks?

Microsoft Issues ’Critical’ Patch Outside Normal Cycle

Microsoft will issue a patch for a "critical" security flaw in Windows, the company said Thursday. The patch comes outside of its normal monthly patching cycle due to the severity of the issue.

The vulnerability can result in a remote code execution, in which malicious attackers could take control of a user's computer to launch code.

According to Microsoft's bulletin, the vulnerability is found in Windows 2000 with Service Pack 4, Windows XP, Windows Server 2003, Windows Vista, and Windows Server 2008.

Issuing patches outside of its monthly cycle is rare for Microsoft. The last time it happened was April 2007, according to a Microsoft representative.

Draft Rules Issued for New Net Suffixes, at $200K

The Internet's key oversight agency issued preliminary guidelines Wednesday for the introduction of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of alternatives to ".com" in the first sweeping changes to the network's 25-year-old address system.

But individuals should forget about claiming a personal domain name suffix for themselves or their families.

The application fee, scheduled to be disclosed Friday, is expected to approach $200,000 - partially refundable only in limited circumstances - to help cover the potential $20 million cost of crafting the guidelines and reviewing applications.

By contrast, the cost of a personal domain name as part of an existing suffix like ".com" is typically less than $10. Individuals should still be able to register addresses that cheaply; what would be costly is getting their own suffix.

The new suffixes could cover locations such as ".nyc" and ".berlin" or industries such as ".bank." Though the hefty application fees will likely curb a rush for individual vanity names, larger companies might claim brands - like ".disney."

The draft rules would permit addresses entirely in non-English languages for the first time and ban suffixes that use only numerals, to avoid technical conflicts. The proposals also address potential conflicts, such multiple requests for the same name or a bid for someone else's trademark or a geographic location.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names or Numbers, or ICANN, is accepting comments from the public for 45 days and plans to start accepting bids early next year. New names won't start appearing in use until at least the end of 2009.

Russia Blocks Google From Acquiring Competitor

Russia has stopped the acquisition of a company by Internet search giant Google. The Russian Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) blocked Google from acquiring Zao Begun, a text-advertising and contextual-search company owned by Rambler Media. Zao serves more than 143,000 Russian-language Web sites.

"We are very disappointed to hear that FAS has come to this decision," said Vladimir Dolgov, Google's business manager in Russia. "We strongly believe that this acquisition will enable us to significantly improve opportunities for Russian users, advertisers and publishers as well as the entire industry."

"At this time we are reviewing FAS's decision," Dolgov added. "Once this process is complete, we will decide on our next steps."

The FAS said it received a petition from Kokuna Holdings Ltd. (owned by Google) about purchasing all the shares of Zao. After studying "the received materials and information on the transaction, FAS Russia, governed by Clause 5 Part 2 Article 33 of the Federal Law On Protection of Competition dismissed the petition," FAS says on its Web site.

FAS's chief, Igor Artemyev, told a Russian online publication that Google had not provided accurate and adequate information about the acquisition.

When Google announced the deal with Rambler in July, the company said the acquisition would give advertisers access to a broader network of sites. Google has been working to gain a larger market share in Russia and planned to build on Zao's experience building advertising, dealer networks, and direct sales in Russia.

Rambler had planned to use Google's AdSense technology on its Web sites. The company, which already owned 51 percent of Zao, was in the midst of acquiring the remaining shares from Finama Bannatyne to sell the entire company to Google.

Google has struggled to gain market share in Russia. Cofounded by Moscow native Sergey Brin, Google hasn't been well received in Russia and Rambler was one of Google's biggest competitors.

Google has made it clear in published reports that Russia is important to the company's growth. Russia has the fastest-growing online population in Europe, rising 27 percent year over year, according to comScore. And the opportunity for growth is enormous, since comScore estimates that only 14 percent of Russia's population is currently online.

The chance for gaining ad dollars is huge as Russia is expected to experience more ad growth than any other European market in 2008, according to Carat, a media and consulting company.

Fake Story About Steve Jobs Planted by Teenager

The fake story submitted to CNN's iReport site that Apple CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a heart attack was the work of an 18-year-old,

according to a report.

Bloomberg is reporting that investigators have determined that the teenager planted the story on CNN's user-generated news site. But they have found no evidence that the suspect attempted to profit from the sharp drop in Apple's stock that occurred after Silicon Alley Insider picked up the CNN posting and published it before verifying whether it was true. The suspect was not named, but the Securities and Exchange Commission has been trying to determine if the story was planted with the idea of making money in the stock market, which would be a crime.

Apple has been forced to deal with all kinds of speculation regarding Jobs' health this year, and any report that his health might be in danger is sure to be met with a frantic response from Wall Street traders who believe Jobs' impact on Apple cannot be overstated.

EU Lawmakers Approve Crackdown on Internet Violence

Cyber-bullying and child pornography will be targeted in a 55 million euro ($70.9 million) scheme agreed by European Union lawmakers on Wednesday.

The European Commission's "Safer Internet" proposal from 2009 to 2013 aims to improve safety for children surfing the Internet, promote public awareness and create national centers for reporting illegal online content.

European politicians are under increasing pressure to prevent the Internet becoming a haven for crime.

German police said in August they were investigating around 1,000 people suspected of having downloaded child pornography after they discovered a website showing the sexual abuse of two young girls.

And last month, a game in which players kill school students was pulled from a Finnish children's gaming site, one week after 10 were gunned down in the country's worst school shooting.

"The most important part of the program is to establish a knowledge base by bringing together researchers engaged in child safety online at European level," said Romanian Conservative lawmaker Csaba Sogor.

"We foresee contact points and hotlines for reporting online illegal content and abusive conduct."

Sogor cited a Eurobarometer survey that he said showed 74 percent of children aged 12 to 15 surfed the Internet for at least three hours a day, and nearly all had viewed pornography.

EU lawmakers backed an amended version of the Commission's proposal with increased emphasis on some new problems on the world wide web, such as harassment and the distribution of violent video clips.

The amended proposals were adopted with 672 votes in favor and nine against, and are expected to be swiftly approved by EU member states.

Microsoft Celebrates Antipiracy Day

Microsoft plans on Tuesday to announce "Global Anti-Piracy Day," an effort to gain attention for the steps the company undertakes in order to thwart those who would profit from illegitimate software.

As part of the event, Microsoft is highlighting recent antipiracy efforts in 49 countries, ranging from the filing of lawsuits in the U.S. to a seminar for journalists in Pakistan.

It’s the kind of thing that Microsoft does all the time, although the company is aiming for some added ink by grouping together so many actions at once.

"One of the things we want to illustrate with this announcement is the diverse nature of the work," associate general counsel David Finn said in an interview from Singapore.

The third pillar of Microsoft’s efforts is its engineering work, adding programs like Windows Genuine Advantage that are designed to make it harder - and less rewarding - to copy Microsoft’s products.

Whether it’s a testament to tougher engineering or the lukewarm response to Vista, or some combination, Windows XP continues to be copied far more than its successor.

"We continue to see much more counterfeit Windows XP," said Finn, who actually says the company is predicting a rise in XP pirating as the last legitimate copies of the OS wind their way off retail shelves.

Overall, Finn said Microsoft and the software industry are making progress in some areas. He noted that the piracy rate in Western Europe has dropped to about 34 percent from the 78 percent level in 1991.

At the same time, however, rates still top 90 percent in some emerging markets. And even in the U.S., where rates are a relatively low 20 percent, that still means 1 in 5 software installations are illegitimate.

"It thwarts innovation," he said.

Do You Really Want a Vista PC in Your Car?

Westwell and Azentek announced the the world’s first fully integrated in-car PCs, the Azentek CPC-1200 and CPC-1100 in-dash car computer systems, in Australia. The PCs act as high-end car stereos, and also offer GPS navigation, mobile phone integration via Bluetooth, multimedia playback and automobile diagnostics.

The CPC-1200 is a complete Microsoft Vista-based PC with a 1.66 GHz Intel Core Duo T2300 processor and 1GB of RAM. It plays DVDs, music and Internet radio, offers GPS functionality with a touch screen, can make and receive mobile calls, and offers voice-enabled e-mail - all in one 2-DIN unit with a 6.5-inch LCD TFT touch screen monitor. The CPC-1100 is even more compact, fitting in just 1-DIN, but leaves out the CD drive; instead, it uses a 7-inch motorized LCD TFT touch screen. Look for both units in December in Australia; pricing is officially "to be determined".

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